DECISION TIME
March 8, 2009

JOHN M. BUCHANAN, PASTOR
FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Psalm 22:22–31
Mark 1:16–20
Mark 8:31–38

"He called the crowd with his disciples,
and said to them, 'If any want to become my followers,
let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.'"
Mark 8:34 (NRSV)

The season of Lent, structured as it is to remember the journey of Jesus to the cross, is also the perfect time for articulating the call of Jesus to discipleship. In these forty days we may contemplate not only the wonderful power of the cross of Christ, but the power inherent in taking up our own crosses too. Opportunities are daily before us, times when we may give our lives sacrificially to acts of love, compassion, justice, and peace. In this season we are wise to ponder not only the cross in our sanctuaries, but the picture of Jesus on the road to Jerusalem, calling all his disciples to take up our own crosses and to walk with him in paths of love and service.

Paul C. Shupe
Feasting on the Word

It was Yogi Berra, I believe, who famously said, "If you come to a fork in the road, take it." Well, sometimes you cannot do that. Sometimes you have to make a decision, this way or that way. Decision time comes around the age of eighteen: to go to college, join the Navy, find a job, or decide not to decide just now, to "veg," I believe it is called, for a while, which means essentially to do nothing, until financial necessity—or your parents—insist that you do something, decide something—anything. The decision of which college to attend, for instance, which used to be fairly simple (some of us applied to one college and agreed to attend without ever having laid eyes on it), today is complicated, drawn out over a year or two, with multiple applications: long shot, fallback position, sure thing, and very expensive. There is the decision to marry and whom to marry—the one to whom you are willing to say "all I am and ever will be, all I have and ever will have, I commit to you." Every time I stand in front of a couple and lead them through their vows, the enormity of what they are doing and the enormity of the decision they have made takes my breath away. There is the decision to choose a vocation, a career path. In every life there come times when

important decisions must be made, and when they are, the tectonic plates of your life shift and fall into place and nothing is ever the same again.

I'm interested this morning in what lies beneath those decisions. I think it is another decision that we all make, perhaps unconsciously, but it is a deeply personal and spiritual decision of what to live for, what to sacrifice for, what to follow and give to, what to die for. We all make that decision. We make it over and over again, every day of our lives. David Foster Wallace, one of the great writers of our generation, committed suicide after a lifelong struggle with mental illness. Before he died, he delivered a remarkable commencement address to the graduates of Kenyon College. He said, "In the day-to-day trenches of adult life, there is actually no such thing as atheism. There is no such thing as not worshiping. Everybody worships. The only choice we get is what to worship." Wallace told the new graduates to be careful and intentional about the choices of what to worship, because some things can "eat you alive." If you choose to worship money and things, there will never be enough. If you choose to worship beauty and sexual allure, you will always feel ugly and "when time and age start showing, you will die a million deaths." "Worship power and you will feel weak and afraid," he said, "and you will need ever more power to keep your fears at bay. Worship your intellect and you will end up feeling stupid, always on the edge of being found out."

He warned the graduates that "you can slip into this kind of worship, little by little, day by day" (see *Context*, February 2009) or you can choose to worship, to give your life to, to sacrifice for, to live and die for something else, something good and authentic and important. It's up to you. You get to decide.

Decision time came to two young men, long ago, standing knee deep in the waters of the Sea of Galilee, casting a fishing net. Another young man walking by on the shore stopped to watch, and when they turned to notice and their eyes met, he said, "Follow me," and they did. They dropped the net and followed. It happened a second time: the three of them now—Jesus and Simon Peter and Andrew, who were brothers—happened upon two other brothers, James and John, sitting in their boat with their father, mending their nets. "Follow me," Jesus said, and they stepped out of the boat to, I have always assumed, the consternation of their father, Zebedee, although maybe he was secretly relieved because finally they had decided to do something besides hanging around with him day after day. They walked away and followed.

There is no explanation. Some have suggested that these men surely must have known Jesus before and had been thinking about his teaching and struggling with the meaning of their own lives. That could be. All Mark tells us is that when Jesus appeared, it was decision time. He didn't tell them

where they were going. He didn't give them an outline for a new career path with measurable goals and outcomes. He said, "Follow me." Decision time. And they followed.

Then, in the middle of the story the way Mark tells it (Mark was the first account to be written; Matthew and Luke had a copy of Mark in front of them when they wrote their own accounts of the life and work of Jesus, and they tell about this incident too in the middle of the story), another decision time, a big one.

Now there are twelve, at least twelve. There were women following him too, but in that time and place they were not counted. The twelve followed as he walked through the rolling hills of Galilee, from village to village, as he stopped to teach in the synagogues. They followed and watched in amazement as crowds gathered everywhere they went, bringing their sick, their elderly, their babies for his blessing, his touch. They watched him heal and listened as he said things they had never heard before: love your enemies, do good to those who hurt you, forgive those who offend you, love one another. They listened as everywhere he said, "The kingdom of God is here, in your midst," tiny, sometimes invisible, like a mustard seed or leaven in a loaf of bread, but it is here in acts of kindness and compassion and fairness and love. They must have talked among themselves: "Who is he? Where are we going?"

In the middle of the story he answers both questions and, I think, gives them the opportunity to drop out and go back to their fishing boats. It's decision time again. "Who do people say that I am?" he asks them. "Some think you are John the Baptist; others say you are Elijah or one of the prophets." "But you," he says, "who do you say that I am? You decide." Simon—Jesus has been calling him "Peter," the rock—blurts out an astonishing response, something they must have talked about, considered in their conversations with one another: "You are the Christ, the Messiah, the Son of the Living God."

"Yes, Peter, what you have said is true. And in order for me to be Messiah, I must go to Jerusalem and suffer and die." "God forbid, Lord," Peter says. Peter is right. The Messiah doesn't suffer. Everyone knows that when the Messiah comes he will rally the people, organize an insurrection. There are hundreds, maybe thousands, of armed passionate patriots called Zealots hiding in the hills, waiting for the moment to strike and drive the hated Romans into the sea and put the Messiah on the throne of David. Everyone knows what a Messiah is supposed to do and it is most certainly not suffer and die. That's what the Romans are going to do when the Messiah comes.

"Get behind me, Peter. Stop talking and listen." Sweeping his eyes over all of them, "If you want to follow me, deny yourself, pick up a cross, and come

along. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. It's your choice."

The thing about Jesus is that everybody, starting with his best friend, Peter, has an opinion about who he is and what it means to follow him. In a fine little book, *Believing in Jesus Christ*, Presbyterian theologian Leanne Van Dyk writes, "You can order a Visa card from the Internet with a picture of Jesus on it. A Jesus Visa. The whole site pitches the card with the line, 'Show the world your love for the most high'; the more you use your credit card, the more you show your love for Jesus. . . . You can load a Jesus screensaver onto your computer. You can buy Jesus playing cards, Jesus bumper stickers, Jesus bookmarks, key chains, lapel pins, earrings." Van Dyk says that ever since Jesus walked and talked with his followers 2,000 years ago, people have defined him to reflect their own priorities, agendas, and aspirations and "enlisted him to support a hopelessly long, often contradictory, and sometimes spectacularly foolish list of causes and convictions."

> Popes, bishops, and soldiers in the Middle Ages understood Jesus as summoning Europe to the cause of the Crusades. Both sides of brutal religious wars have shouted his name. Some assumed that Jesus approved colonial conquests of Africa, Asia, South America, and North America in the Age of Empires. Others claimed that he allowed, even required, the institution of American slavery. (Van Dyk, pp. 1–2)

His friend, Peter, was merely the first to try to define him and, by inference, what it means to follow him, to take his name upon yourself—Christian. Deny yourself, he said, as he did just that: replaced his own agenda with God's, decided himself to follow God's plan, God's will—to love, to heal, to reach out in forgiveness and compassion, to challenge the values and assumptions of his own culture and religion, even if it meant suffering and dying, which is ultimately exactly what it did mean.

Jesus decided to show the world who God was, what God was like and, at the same time, to show the world what an authentic human life looks like.

"Deny yourself." Caution is necessary here. Sometimes that has been heard as a command to accept whatever is happening to you, without protest or complaint. Sometimes victims of oppression and abuse conclude that Jesus wants them to deny themselves by accepting what is happening as just the way things are, a cross to bear, it is sometimes said. Sally Brown says, "There is nothing Christian about the denigration of the God-given self which, whether self-inflicted or perpetuated by others, undermines (an) individual and renders him or her powerless to resist destructive relationships. Adults and children who are or have been victims of domestic

abuse can hear the admonition to deny yourself as advice to accept the suffering without protest. The results can be disastrous, even deadly" (*Lectionary Homiletics: Lent*). Accepting abuse is not denying self and taking up a cross, ever. Abuse is to be resisted and stopped. Period.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer thought about this matter in the 1930s as the Nazi party assumed control of Germany and began to persecute Jews and prepare for war. He wrote one of the most influential books of the twentieth century, *The Cost of Discipleship*, which I first encountered in Divinity School and which is one of the most worn and marked and beloved books I own. In it he defines Christian faith—not as a system of theological propositions, which is what I assumed Christianity was at the time, but as an act of radical, personal obedience to Jesus Christ. When Jesus says, "Deny yourself," Bonhoeffer believed it meant to put Jesus Christ and his will at the very center of one's being. When Jesus says, "Follow me," Bonhoeffer believed it meant to live your life in the world as his man or woman, totally, holding nothing back. It was this radical definition of faith as following and obeying Jesus Christ in the world that led Bonhoeffer to join the resistance and help plan an attempt to assassinate Adolph Hitler. For him, self-denial translated into a strong and passionate commitment to the peace of Christ, which at that time meant opposing and bringing down the Nazis, the current political powers. The plot failed. Bonhoeffer was arrested, imprisoned, and was executed in April of 1945 just before the war ended.

For Bonhoeffer, to take up the cross of Christ meant not acceptance of oppression and suffering but resistance, the voluntary assumption of costly behavior on behalf of others in the name of Jesus Christ. That's what taking up the cross means: the voluntary assumption of costly behavior on behalf of others in the name of Jesus Christ. To follow was literally, for Dietrich Bonhoeffer, to follow to the cross.

The call to follow happens far less dramatically for most of us, thanks be to God. I have always loved the way New Testament scholar Lamar Williamson put it: "The woman who devotes her life to raising children in need of a home, the man whose devotion to a mentally ill wife is quiet and steady, the youth whose civil disobedience for conscience sake leads to prison or exile—there are countless thousands who, through the centuries and in varying contexts, have interpreted this text with their lives" (*Interpretation: Mark*).

In the midst of thinking about this sermon this week, I attended a meeting of the Board of Directors of the Presbyterian Publishing Corporation, our church's publishing house. It is fascinating work, and as we do, three times a year, we examine and hear about the acquisitions, books that are in the early planning stages and will be published in the next year or so. It's very interesting. One of our projects is a theological commentary on the Bible. It

will be a wonderful contribution to biblical scholarship and enormously helpful to preachers wanting fresh insights into biblical texts. The editor in charge of the project told us that a professor at Fuller Seminary, John Goldingay, has been commissioned to write seventeen volumes on the Old Testament. Now biblical theological commentaries are hefty, big, doorstop books. Attempting a little irreverent humor, I said, “Well, I hope he’s young: seventeen big books is a lot.” Board members chuckled, but then the editor said, “Actually he’s in his mid-sixties. His wife suffers from advanced multiple sclerosis. Dr. Goldingay takes care of her, all day, every day. He doesn’t travel any longer, doesn’t accept speaking engagements, doesn’t attend scholarly conferences [as scholars love to do]. He stays with her all day, every day, takes care of his wife and writes books.”

I was ashamed at my attempt at levity and grateful for John Goldingay, whom I do not know but who understands what Jesus meant when he said, “If you want to be a follower, deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow. . . . Those who lose their life for my sake and for the sake of the gospel will save it.”

That’s very nice, but hold on. What if I don’t know where he will lead me? What if I don’t know what I believe about him? What if I don’t have my theology figured out? What if I’m not sure I believe at all?

The amazing thing is that he doesn’t ask for any of that, never asked for a statement of theological principles, not even a confession of faith. What he said was, “Follow me. Take up a cross and follow.”

It was years—centuries even—before his friends worked out the theology, the Christology, the ecclesiology, the ethical systems and all the rest of it, the paraphernalia of institutional Christianity. In the beginning it was “follow me,” and they slowly came to understand as they followed and carried their crosses.

Years ago Albert Schweitzer, in a scholarly book about the identity of Jesus Christ, concluded with what has become a classic statement of Christian discipleship:

> He comes to us as One unknown, without a name, as of old, by the lakeside, he came to those men who knew him not. He speaks to us the same word: “Follow thou me!” and sets us to the tasks which he has to fulfill for our time. He commands. And to those who obey him, whether they be wise or simple, he will reveal himself in the toils, the conflicts, the sufferings which they shall pass through in his fellowship, and, as an ineffable mystery, they shall learn in their own experience who he is. (*Quest for the Historical Jesus*)

“Follow me.” Are you willing to risk it this Lent? Are you willing to join up and follow behind? Let’s give it a try, test it out: invest ourselves in caring and loving and risking and advocating and serving others, near and far, in his name.

Let’s voluntarily assume some costly action on behalf of another person for the sake of Jesus Christ.

Let’s decide this morning to test the promise, take up the cross. “If you lose your life for my sake and for the sake of the gospel, you will find it.”

Amen.